

Connections

Michigan Foster Care Review Board Program

Advocating for Permanency through Reviews and Collaboration

Summer 2003

ENSURING PERMANENCY AND CONTINUITY IN FOSTER CARE

by Rod Johnson

Interim Manager, Child Welfare Services

I recently had the privilege to hear a foster care alumnus explain how she was born into and removed from a Jewish family, placed in a Christian foster home, and adopted by Buddhist parents. Subsequently, the system's failure to ensure the continuity of her religious heritage became problematic when she attempted to reconnect to Judaism several years later to no avail.

Preserving the continuity of family relationships and connections for all of Michigan's foster children is one of seven outcomes pertaining to the safety, permanency, and well-being of our foster children that Michigan is striving to improve.

Guaranteeing continuity is not, however, a new challenge for Michigan's child welfare communities. In 1985 the Coleman Commission, chaired by retired Michigan Supreme Court Justice Mary S. Coleman, found 2,634 children who had been in state supervised foster care for over two years. The Commission also found that 35 percent of these foster children had experienced four or more foster care moves.

In 1996, the Binsfeld Children's Commission told us that some social workers mistakenly believed that a child could adjust to future placements without an appreciable impact on the child's self-esteem, which is to say that we were not educating our social workers on the damage that multiple moves have on a young child.

Michigan's 2002 Child and Family Services Review revealed that Michigan needs to work harder to preserve the continuity of our foster children's family relationships and connections. Although Michigan substantially achieved the goal—i.e., no more than two (2) foster care moves per foster care episode—in 75 percent of the cases reviewed, ensuring continuity was determined to be an area needing improvement because we fell shy of the 90 percent required for substantial conformity with the national standard. While Michigan did not reach the required 90 percent achievement required for

substantial conformity, there were areas of strength. For example, we preserved family and community connections for most of our children in the foster care cases reviewed, and (when relevant) almost all children were placed in proximity to their communities of origin. In contrast, we were found to be inconsistent in our efforts to place children with siblings or to search for relatives as potential placement resources, particularly paternal relatives. The reviewers also registered concerns regarding Michigan's efforts to promote visitation and bonding with parents.

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A random sampling of a cohort of cases recently reviewed by citizen foster care reviewers revealed that at the time of the reviews the average length of time in foster care was 13.7 months, and each child reviewed had experienced an average of 2.12 foster care moves.

Recognizing that protective removals and lengthy stays in foster care are all too often necessary, this edition of *Connections* highlights both the importance and the benefits of continuing our efforts to ensure that all of our foster children enjoy permanency and stability in their living situations. Thus, in this edition we feature articles submitted by three women who were in foster care in Michigan. These women and the countless others (past and present) served by our foster care system know better than most what it means to be a foster child removed from one's home and to be separated from people and things familiar. Finally, in this edition we present a message from another former foster child, Susan Emfinger. Together with others who serve children, Susan has established another way to help our foster care alumni have a brighter future.

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MY EXPERIENCE IN FOSTER CARE

by Renee

*Renee is a member of the Jim Casey Youth Foundation's
Youth Initiative's Youth Board¹*

Foster care saved my life. It saved me from further unbearable abuse from my father. It saved my sanity. If I hadn't been taken out of my home and placed in a safe environment, it's scary to think what circumstances I would be in right now.

I was placed in a teenage girl group home at the age of 17. My first foster parents, Harold and Nancy, were there for the start of my healing process. They taught me patience and strength that I had never known before. I had a lot of good talks with Harold and Nancy. I learned how to take life day by day because of them. Harold connected me to a really wonderful therapist who changed how I looked at the world.

A few months after I turned 18, I went into independent living and moved to my second foster home. My foster parents Sue, and Steve, helped me to get a car, a license and full-time employment. I also took my first college class while living with them. I was able to experience a normal family setting that was very healthy for me. They helped me get through the trial I faced against my biological parents.

Foster care allowed me to be the person that I never was before. I was allowed to have my freedom. It was okay to use my voice and people actually listened. I was never yelled at or punished. My self-esteem was able to build up, instead of down, for the first time in my life.

In June of 2002, I moved to my college dorm where I still am a year later. I am approaching my sophomore year of college in the fall. I still remain in touch with both of my foster families on a regular basis. Both sets of them believe in me and love me. Because of them, I know I can do anything I set my mind to!

CONTINUITY FOR TODAY'S FOSTER CHILDREN

by Rose M. Garland

Program Coordinator,

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Site Coordinator, Let Our Voices Echo ("LOVE")

Foster Youth Board

Although I'm in my late 20's, I still label myself a foster care survivor. It is difficult for a foster child to feel like being a contributing part of society, when, as a child, you felt worthless because you were moved so much. It was as if no one wanted you.

I remember a poem I wrote when I was 14, describing the losses I had constantly felt as part of the system from age 3.

**I am a black open well.
You drop a bucket into me,
Constantly taking
- all I own, all I have -**

**But you never let the rain refill me
My water levels sink lower and lower -
I own nothing, and soon,
I will have no more to give.**

The losses foster children experience can be manifold. Not only do we lose our birth-mothers and/or fathers, but very often all of our extended family as well.

We lose the bedrooms we were used to, the schools we were accustomed to, the churches we were raised in, the friends we made, the toys we loved, and the siblings we cherished. And, in many cases, we lost them again and again; constantly having to rebuild, like the phoenix - always being reborn from the ashes. There may be few who understand loss as well as a foster child, and therefore few who need as much continuity and love. Let me explain what I mean.

Every time I moved, I felt like I wasn't supposed to mourn the old place, and my therapists never wanted to talk about that. They wanted to know about the ABUSE. It seemed hurtful and not safe to show my new foster parents how much I lost and missed even the most unstable of my homes. Splitting up with my younger brother was the hardest, because for the first five years we were in care, we felt as if we were each other's strength. Although we were only separated for five of the over ten years we were in care, to this day our relationship is confused and sad - desperate and loving.

There is also pain in the re-attachment process. Each time a child is moved to a new home, he or she is presented with a new extended family, a new school, a new church, and new familial norms that are never the same as they were in the last place you lived. You are presented with only one choice for emotional survival: accept what is offered on everyone else's terms. Your emotional and mental needs cannot exist in a constantly shifting, unstable world.

Foster care is supposed to help youth in care, not punish them. That is why it is so important to maintain as many biological, emotional and spiritual connections as possible for those in care, to allow foster children their own identity and to promote a sense of self-worth and community engagement.

The system is improving all the time and I'm glad for that. However, there is a child in the system - right now, recently separated from all he's ever known - who knows that a lot more can and must be done to help our nation's foster children.



¹ The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is a major national effort to help youth in foster care make successful transitions to adulthood.
<http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org/>

HELEN BROWN

*Volunteer, Foster Care Review Board #14
Huron/Lapeer/Sanilac/St. Clair Counties*

I would like to speak about my experiences as a former foster child. I was in foster care from the time I was four until I was 18. I was moved four different times and lived in a detention/children's home for three of those years. Many of the experiences of loss and loneliness and confusion about who I belonged to and where I fit have taken years for me to resolve. I only wanted to be treated as a "normal child," and have someone who thought I was worth keeping.

During those years I experienced many misuses of authority. I had people who, because I was in foster care, had access to me and misused me. My question to myself was, would my own family have done these things to me? A question that will never be answered. The question then became, why didn't I talk with a trusted adult about the situations? What trusted adults?? There were few adults in my life that I could trust. All of them had either left me or I had been taken from them. How was a child to know who to trust and who not to? I remember at the age of 11 making the decision to keep all of these matters to myself because I would be the one who was punished. I would be the one taken from a home where I finally felt "normal" and loved.

I did have a caseworker who was a man of truth. He was the one constant in my childhood and I knew that he could be counted on, but there were things happening to me, and I knew if I shared them, they would impact me negatively.

So, looking at my experience as a foster child and as an adult who has worked through the judicial system as a juvenile probation officer, I see these experiences through many different glasses. If the State's interest in children is to give them a chance to have a healthy life and to grow to be responsible citizens, then before they are removed from their natural parents or moved from foster home to foster home, caseworkers need to ask themselves, "Am I doing the least amount of harm to this child?" "Will this child's life be better because the State stepped in?"

In my case, the answer was "yes." Despite the difficulties I experienced as a child, I finally ended up in an incredible foster home with a foster mother who loved children, and was even able to withstand the difficulties of raising teenage girls.

My challenge to the State of Michigan decision-makers with regard to foster care is—if we who care about foster children don't expend the money, time, emotional energy, and stop looking for who is at fault—then we are guilty of creating a climate that fosters harm to children. We must ask ourselves, are we who have the power to make decisions for children - doing no harm?

My life has been colored by the social service system in Michigan, and I will be forever grateful to the individuals who did no harm in my life. Please be that kind of person to the thousands of children in foster care today.

LIVING IN GRATITUDE: WHY WE ESTABLISHED THE FOSTER CHILD SCHOLARSHIP

*Susan L. Emfinger
(Former Foster Child), MSU Alumnus*

Each and every time, I am touched by the stories of the people that I regard as my brothers and sisters in foster care. When I think of the intelligence, the strength, and the personal faith that we former foster children carry with us every day to overcome our circumstances, I am humbled, and so very grateful.

I am humbled by the spirit in each of us that has allowed us to survive, and even thrive, despite our childhoods and despite the odds. For me and for my friend, Robert Henry, it is now a time to give back, and to help other kids coming up through foster care as much as we can.

For Rob and me, one way to give back was by establishing the Foster Care Scholarship at Michigan State University.

Perhaps one of the first such scholarships of its kind, the Foster Child Scholarship was created by me and my friend and former MSU colleague, Rob Henry. Both of us had experienced both the hardship and the rewards of foster care, and with the help of wonderful foster parents, we managed to get ourselves into college and a career. We wanted other foster children to have that same opportunity, and to show future foster children that others in the world care for them, think of them, and support them in their struggle to succeed.

I would like to invite my extended foster care family - my fellow foster children, foster parents across Michigan, and anyone working with foster care issues - to do the same, and to consider making a contribution to the Foster Care Scholarship at Michigan State University.

How the Foster Child Scholarship Works

The Foster Child Scholarship was established in close collaboration with MSU's Office of Financial Aid, which helps to notify those students who indicate they have ever been a "ward of the court" on their financial aid application, and the MSU School of Social Work, which has agreed to establish a committee to choose the scholarship recipients and to help mentor foster child scholars throughout their time at MSU. *It is our goal to support these children who have somehow, despite incredibly difficult familial circumstances that are often compounded by economic and social disadvantage, manage to realize their dream of obtaining a college education.*

A Gift of Any Size Will Help

No matter what you decide to give, your gift will be gratefully accepted. We need every dollar so that, by March 2005, we will have raised another \$12,000 for this scholarship. By raising this amount, we will fully endow the scholarship—that is, we will get the scholarship fund to a point where MSU can afford to forever manage it, invest it and grow it. In this way, the scholarship will always be there to help deserving foster children in the future.

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Foster Care Review Board Program

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Foster Child Scholarship (continued)

How to Give

Making a gift to the scholarship can be done in one of the following ways:

By check:

- Make your check payable to Michigan State University.
- In the memo section of the check, write the words, "**Foster Child Scholarship**"
- Send your check to:
University Development
Michigan State University
4700 South Hagadorn Road, Suite 220
East Lansing, MI 48823-5399

Making a gift online:

- Go to the MSU Office of University Development web site at www.givingto.msu.edu/give.html and follow the instructions

By phone:

Call the MSU Office of University Development at 1-800-232-4678 and **say you would like to contribute to the Foster Child Scholarship.**

For any additional information, or to volunteer to help fundraise for this scholarship, please call and leave a message at (248) 541-9532.

Thank you. *Susan*

The Michigan
Foster Care Review Board Program
is administered by the State Court Administrative Office
of the Michigan Supreme Court, John D. Ferry, Jr., State Court
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MISSION STATEMENT

The Mission of the Foster Care Review Board is to utilize citizen volunteers to review and evaluate permanency planning processes and outcomes for children and families in the Michigan foster care system. Based on the data collected through case review, the Foster Care Review Board advocates for systemic improvements in areas of child safety, timely permanency, and family and child well-being.

VISION STATEMENT

The Foster Care Review Board will be viewed and valued by the courts, the FIA, private child-placing agencies, the legislature, and the citizens of Michigan as a major source of credible data on the performance of the child welfare system in Michigan. Additionally, the citizens will use the data to shape public policy and promote awareness regarding the children's foster care system.

Visit us on the Web at:
www.courts.mi.gov/scao/services/fcrb